

The Elisabeth Elliot Newsletter

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Serious Play, Careless Work

When I was a kid we rushed home every afternoon from school, burst into the house to make sure Mother was there where we wanted her to be (she was), and then collected the kids on the block to play Kick the Can or to build playhouses out of wooden greenhouse boxes. Equipment didn't cost us a cent. Adults didn't have to supervise us or drive us anywhere or coach us. We just played. We were kids, and we knew that after-school time was playtime—until it was time to work (practice the piano, set the table, clear the table, do homework).

Something has gone badly awry. Educators have gotten terribly serious about play and terribly casual about real physical work. Billions of dollars are lavished on developing crafts which nobody really needs and forms of recreation which people have to be taught to like. We've got "toys to grow on," computer games, play groups, playgrounds. Tiny tots who would have been happy with a few Tupperware containers and some spoons are given fancy mechanical toys that *do* things, and taught that if they make huge messes with finger paints they're being creative, which they didn't know they wanted to be.

There's something wrong with our sense of balance and of the fitness of things. I've seen Indian children playing in the river, climbing trees, sliding down mudbanks. But at the same time they were often catching fish or finding wild honey, fruit, or edible snails. They had no toys to play with but they had a marvelous time (at the age of three or four, mind you) building fires, sharpening knives, whacking away at the ever-encroaching weeds. Nobody told them what to do. Child's play naturally turned into useful work. My little three-year-old Valerie was

as adept at these activities as the Indians—learned just as they had, by daily observation of adult men and women at work, then by imitation. A girl of ten could weave a perfect hammock; a boy of ten could handle a blowgun and bring home the "bacon," *i.e.* a bird or monkey for supper. A lot of what they did mattered, and they had much more fun than children who spend a good part of their childhood doing things that don't matter very much to them or anybody else.

Aren't children nowadays getting far too much of the wrong kind of attention and not nearly enough of the right kind? Does it really make sense for kids of six and seven to be so frantically serious about organized sports and geniuses at computer games, but to have no idea how to amuse themselves without a coach, a team, a uniform, an arsenal of weapons, or an expensive and complicated piece of electronic equipment—not to mention daily transportation to and from the athletic field, park, ice rink, anywhere but the back yard? Must they be rounded up, herded, instructed, shouted at, praised, coaxed, and hovered over by adults who are paid money to pay attention to the poor little hooligans in order to keep them out of the adults' hair during "working hours"?

Is anybody paying attention to how a *child* works? Is it assumed that if asked to rake a lawn he'll do it halfheartedly? Will he sweep the garage in silent fury or will he rejoice in doing a thorough job of it? Will she scrub a sink till it shines and know herself to be a useful member of a household? School teachers desperately try to teach children who have never really labored with their hands to do schoolwork—not a very good place to start, it seems to me. If a child is not given to understand that he has a responsibility to help make the wheels of home run smoothly—if he is not given work which matters, in other words—why should he imagine

that it matters very much whether he cooperates with teachers and fellow students? His parents have failed to give attention to a vital matter. Their attention has been elsewhere—on their own interests, jobs, amusements, physical fitness, or only on the child's health and a misguided notion of happiness which leaves out work altogether. If the "quality time" his father spends with him is limited to amusements rather than work, small wonder the child assumes nobody really likes work. His choices in how to spend his time, like his preferences in food, are *taught* at home—by observation of parental attitudes.

The jungle Indian children I knew learned without formal lessons of any kind. They were with their parents more or less all the time—everybody sleeping around a single fire at night, boys hunting or fishing with their fathers by day, girls planting and gathering food with their mothers. It was hard work to survive. They took that for granted and pitched in. Everybody was responsible to collect firewood and keep the fire burning. Very rarely did a parent even have to tell a child, let alone nag him, to do his job. It was expected and the kids met the expectations. Nobody over two had much leisure, but they had a lot of fun. I've never seen people laugh so much. It was a peaceful life, a life without anything like the severe stresses and conflicts we have created for ourselves. Wouldn't it be lovely to go back to all that?

But how are we supposed to do it? We don't live in the jungle. Children have jungle gyms instead of real trees to climb; plastic swimming pools instead of a clear flowing river; sliding boards instead of mudbanks. The work necessary to keep everybody alive and fed and clothed is done where they can't see it. So far as children can see, it usually has nothing to do with being fed and clothed but only with money. Their parents (often, alas, both of them) tear off somewhere in the morning and come home at night exhausted, having spent their day at who knows what. The newspaper, dinner, and TV take up a chunk of what's left of the day. Football, the child learns by observation, is vastly more important than anything else in the father's life. It takes precedence over everything, rivets his father's attention, something he himself has never managed to do. So he, like his father, seeks

escape from home and the responsibilities of home.

Is the situation irremediable? I don't think so. Surely we could eliminate some of the frustration and discontent of "civilized" family life if we took our cues from the "uncivilized" people who work almost all the time (and *enjoy* it) and play very little of the time (without making a complicated chore out of it). Happiness, after all, is a choice. Let your child see that you put heart and soul into the work God has given you to do. Do it for Him—that changes the whole climate of the home. Draw the child into acceptance of responsibility by starting very early. Expect the best. If you expect them to oppose you, to "goof off," to be terrible at two, rude at ten, intractable as teenagers, they won't disappoint you.

It takes longer, of course, to teach a child to do a job than it takes to do it yourself—especially if you have not given him the chance to watch you do it fifty times. It takes sustained attention—the sort of attention a child desperately needs. He can't get too much of that. He needs to be convinced that he is a necessary and very much appreciated member of the family.

What about the sacrifices? We're going to have to make some if we mean to correct our mistakes. Instead of sacrificing everything for money and sports, which most people seem ready to do without a qualm, we may have to sacrifice money and sports for our children. We will certainly have to sacrifice *ourselves*. But, of course, that is what being a father or a mother means. Selah.

My Mother

She was Kath to her close friends, Dearie to my father, and always Mother (never Mom) to her six children. She held us on her lap when we were small and rocked us, sang to us, and told us stories. We begged for the ones about "when you were a little girl." Katharine Gillingham was born June 21, 1899 in Philadelphia. We loved hearing about the butler who did tricks for her behind her parents' backs and about the alarmed

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postman who rushed to rescue the screaming child with her arm down a dog's throat until he heard what she was saying: "He's got my *peanut!*" In 1922 she married Philip E. Howard Jr., a man who, because he had lost an eye in an accident, felt sure no woman would have him. They worked for five years with the Belgian Gospel Mission, then returned to the States when he became associate editor (later editor) of *The Sunday School Times*.

Mother's course was finished on February 7. She was up and dressed as usual in the morning at the Quarryville Presbyterian Home in Pennsylvania, made it to lunch with the help of her walker, lay down afterwards, having remarked rather matter-of-factly to someone that she knew she was dying, and wondered where her husband was. Later in the afternoon cardiac arrest took her, very quietly.

Each of us (in chronological order) took a few minutes at the funeral to speak of some aspect of Mother's character. Phil spoke of her consistency and unfailing availability as a mother; of her love for Dad, ("He was always my lover," she said). I recalled how she used to mop her eyes at the table, laughing till she cried at some of my father's bizarre descriptions, or even at his oft-told jokes; how she was obedient to the New Testament pattern of godly womanhood, including hospitality. Dave talked about her unreserved surrender to the Lord, first of herself (at Stony Brook conference in New York), and then (painfully, years later at Prairie Bible Institute in Canada) of her children; of how, when we left home, she followed us not only with prayer but, for forty years with hardly a break, with a weekly letter. Ginny told how Mother's example taught her what it means to be a lady; how to discipline herself, her children, her home. Tom remembered the books she read to us (A.A. Milne, Beatrix Potter, *Sir Knight of the Splendid Way*, for example), and the songs she sang as she rocked each of us little children ("Safe in the Arms of Jesus," "Go Tell Aunt Nancy") shaping our vision of life. Jim pictured her sitting in her small cane rocker in the bay window of her bedroom after the breakfast dishes were done, sitting quietly before the Lord with the Bible, *Daily Light*, and notebook.

The last three years were sorrowful ones for all of us. Arteriosclerosis had done its work in

her mind and she was confused and lonely ("Why hasn't Dad been to see me?" "He's been with the Lord for 23 years, Mother." "Nobody told me!"). Still a lady, she tried to be neatly groomed, always offered a chair to those who came. She had not lost her humor, her almost unbeatable skill at Scrabble, her ability to play the piano, sing hymns, and remember her children. But she wanted us to pray that the Lord would let her go Home, so we did.

The funeral ended with the six of us singing "The Strife is O'er," then all family members, including our beloved aunts Alice and Anne Howard, sang "To God be the Glory." The graveside service closed with the doxology (the one with Alleluias). We think of her now, loving us with an even greater love, her poor frail mortality left behind, her eyes beholding the King in His beauty. "If you knew what God knows about death," wrote George MacDonald, "you would clap your listless hands."



A New Book

In May, my new book, *A Chance to Die: The Life and Legacy of Amy Carmichael*, will be available. Amy Carmichael became for me what some now call a role model. She was far more than that. She was my first spiritual mother; she showed me the shape of godliness.

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Prayers

The following suggestions for intercession are abridged from Lancelot Andrewes' *Private Devotions*:

for those who have a claim on me
from kinship,—
for brothers and sisters, that God's blessing
may be on them and on their children;
or from benefits conferred,—that Thy recompence
may be on all who have benefitted me, who have
ministered to me in spiritual, material, or physical
things;
or from trust placed in me,—
those whom I have educated, employed, served,
influenced;
or from natural kindness,—for all who love me,
though I know them not;
or from Christian love,—for those who hate me
without cause, or even on account of truth and
righteousness;
or from neighborhood,—those who dwell near me;
or from promise,—for all whom I have promised
to remember in prayers;
or from mutual office,—for all who remember me
in their prayers and ask of me the same;
or from stress of engagements,—for all who for
any sufficient cause fail to call upon Thee.

RECOMMENDED READING: Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage* (Multnomah Press). A Drop-Everything book. A book on marriage to end all books on marriage. "This one is a crackerjack!" says J.I. Packer. Mason deals with the stunning paradoxes of the mystery, the problems (all of them) and the glories (more than I'd ever thought of). I don't need to read any other books on the subject.

Travel Schedule, May/June 1987

May 1 Berrien Springs, MI; Andrews University, 616-471-7771.

May 2 Flint, MI; Calvary United Methodist Church, 313-238-7685.

May 8 Staten Island, NY; Gateway Cathedral, 718-351-2400.

May 15, 16 Winnipeg, MAN; Winnipeg Bible College, 204-284-2923.

May 22 London, ONT; Compassion of Canada, 519-473-9220.

May 23 Petrolia, ONT; New Life Assembly, 519-882-1600.

May 30 Falls Church, VA; The Falls Church women, 703-532-7600.

June 8-12 Charlottesville, VA; Center for Christian Study, 804-295-2471.

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